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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges an end to all violence and restrictions on peaceful religious activity in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China.

Recent violence in the cities of Hotan and Kashgar has led reportedly to the death of dozens of Uighur Muslim and Han Chinese, the most since June 2009 ethnic clashes in the XUAR. Beijing's official media described the violence as acts of terrorists fueled by "religious extremism," points disputed by Uighur groups outside of China. Chinese officials in the XUAR announced yesterday new "high pressure" security measures and stated their intent to show "no mercy" toward anyone pursuing separatism or violence.

"Beijing's policy toward the Uighur Muslims is trapped in a cycle of repression and discontent, viewing even peaceful expressions of protest or public piety as evidence of religious extremism and separatism," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. "There is no excuse for violence targeting innocent civilians. Yet, Beijing needs to recognize that indiscriminate repression of Uighur religious, cultural, and political life will not bring stability, only fuel further frustration. The first step in building trust and addressing instability has to come from Beijing. They should end all restrictions on peaceful religious activities and allow for independent and transparent investigations of the violence."

In its May, 2011 Annual Report, USCIRF outlined the religious freedom abuses caused by Beijing's current ethnic and religious policy in the XUAR. Teachers, professors, university students, and other government employees are prohibited from observing Ramadan and engaging in daily religious activities such as reciting prayers, distributing religious materials, and wearing head coverings. Minors under the age of 18 continue to be denied access to some mosques and to religious education. In order to curtail alleged "religious extremism," Chinese officials have detained Uighur Muslim clerics and students for meeting in "illegal" religious study groups. "Illegal" Uighur mosques have been forcibly closed and police continue to confiscate large quantities of "illegal" religious publications. Religious freedom conditions in the XUAR have declined rapidly since June, 2009 ethnic violence.

"It is the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, a time of peace," said Leo. "We urge an end to all violence in Uighur areas of China. We also urge Beijing to take the bold step of ending draconian restrictions on peaceful religious practice among Uighur Muslims, as a signal that it will seriously address their long-standing concerns."

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.